



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

China's Religious Freedom Violations: Domestic Repression and Malign Influence Abroad

December 14, 2022

**Testimony of Yaqiu Wang
Senior Researcher, China
Human Rights Watch**

Chairman Turkel, Vice Chairman Cooper, and Honorable Commissioners, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I will discuss some recent developments in China, Human Rights Watch research on Chinese government repression of religion, and the authorities' deployment of technology to suppress religious freedom inside and outside the country.

Chinese law allows people to practice only five officially recognized religions in officially approved premises, and authorities retain control over personnel appointments, publications, finances, and seminary applications. Since 2016, when President Xi Jinping called for "Sinicization" of religions, state control over religion has strengthened. Going beyond controlling religion by dictating what constitutes "normal" – and therefore legal – religious activity, authorities now seek to comprehensively reshape religions such that they are consistent with the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party and to promote allegiance to the party and President Xi.

Technology-based censorship and surveillance are central to religious repression in China.

Domestic Repression

The new Measures on the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services came into effect in March 2022, prohibiting individuals or groups from teaching or otherwise propagating religion online without official approval. A widely used Catholic app, CathAssist, shut down in August because it was unable to obtain a license. The regulations have reportedly severely

disrupted people's religious life as many have increasingly relied on online religious gatherings and information especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2021, Apple [took down](#) a popular Quran app and a Bible app in China's App Store at the request of Chinese officials.

With regard to Christians in China, police [continue](#) to harass, arrest, and imprison leaders and members of "house churches," congregations that refuse to join official Catholic and Protestant churches. Authorities also disrupt their peaceful activities and ban them outright. In 2019, a Sichuan court sentenced Wang Yi, a prominent Christian pastor, to nine years in prison for "inciting subversion." In 2021, a Shenzhen court sentenced four employees from a company that sold audio devices broadcasting the Bible to between 15 months and six years for "operating an illegal business."

In October 2022, the Holy See and the Chinese government renewed an [agreement](#) signed in 2018 on the appointment of Roman Catholic bishops. It was renewed despite the Chinese government's arrest of Cardinal Joseph Zen and the continued detentions of Bishops Zhang Weizhu and Cui Tai, among others. Historically, the leadership of China's underground Catholic Church has endured enormous suffering for their loyalty to the pope and opposition to state control of religion. Cardinal [Kung Pin-Mei](#), the first Chinese person to hold the post of bishop, spent 30 years in prison. In November, the Vatican in an official statement [expressed](#) "surprise and regret" after Chinese authorities violated the agreement by installing a bishop in a diocese not recognized by the Holy See.

In Xinjiang, as is now widely known, Chinese authorities have detained one million or more Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims for political "[re-education](#)," and subject those who are not confined in camps and prisons to omnipresent [surveillance](#). Some Xinjiang checkpoints are equipped with special machines called "data doors" that—unbeknown to the people passing through them—vacuum up identifying information from their mobile phones and other electronic devices. To track, monitor, and profile Turkic Muslims, agents also rely on artificial intelligence, including facial and number-plate recognition, which have been connected with surveillance cameras that blanket both the region and other parts of the country. In addition, the authorities collect biometric data—including voice samples, iris scans, and [DNA](#)—and store them in searchable databases.

In 2017, Human Rights Watch research [uncovered](#) that the US-based medical technology manufacturer company, [Thermo Fisher Scientific](#), had [sold](#) DNA sequencers to the Xinjiang police. In 2019, Thermo Fisher announced it would [stop](#) selling human identification technology in Xinjiang.

In 2019, Human Rights Watch "reverse-engineered" a mobile app used by the Xinjiang police and was able to [look inside](#) it to see the vast array of information collected. That information ranges from obvious personal attributes—a person's blood type or height—to their "religious

atmosphere” and political affiliations. It includes whether someone has obtained a new phone number, donated to a mosque, or preached the Quran without authorization.

In Tibet, authorities continue to enforce severe [restrictions](#) on freedom of religion. Under intense censorship, Tibetans continue to be detained for online offenses, such as having banned content on their phones or “spreading rumors.” Authorities introduced a ban on posting religious teaching and other content online, intended to enforce tight official control over religious institutions and teachers. In a Tibetan area of Sichuan province, regional authorities ordered the demolition of outdoor statues and temples, the construction of which had initially been approved.

In 2022, reports emerged of the arrest and sentencing of Tibetan religious and cultural figures suspected of dissent, and of their mistreatment in detention—notably the writers [Go Sherab Gyatso](#), Rongwo Gendun Lhundrup, and Tubten Lodro. In March, the popular young pop singer Tsewang Norbu staged a self-immolation protest in front of the Potala Palace, the first by a Tibetan from an urban background.

Human Rights Watch research [shows](#) Chinese authorities are significantly increasing policing, including arbitrary collection of DNA from residents, including children, in many towns and villages throughout the Tibet Autonomous Region. The available information indicates that people cannot decline providing their DNA and that police do not need credible evidence of any criminal conduct. The collection drives are part of ongoing efforts by Chinese authorities to establish police presence at the grassroots level throughout the region. Thermo Fisher has [sold](#) DNA kits and replacement parts for sequencers to police in Tibet.

Falun Gong practitioners in China continue to face [severe repression](#). Many have been jailed in recent years for accessing banned websites, posting messages about the spiritual group on social media, and sharing prohibited internet circumvention tools. In January, Falun Gong practitioner Xu Na was sentenced to eight years in prison for sending photos and information about Covid-19 restrictions to a foreign-based Falun Gong-affiliated news website. Key words related to Falun Gong are banned on the Chinese internet.

Transnational Repression

The Chinese government’s religious repression stretches beyond its borders. In September 2022, dozens of members of a Shenzhen church fled to Thailand to seek refuge after having left China three years ago due to escalating police harassment and after they failed to secure refugee status in South Korea. The group reported being monitored by Chinese government agents in Thailand.

Chinese authorities have hacked into Turkic Muslims’ smartphones around the world by embedding malicious software in apps and software frequently used by Turkic Muslims. Similar tactics were also used to target the Tibetan diaspora.

Leveraging its economic power, the Chinese government compels other governments to facilitate its repression against Turkic Muslims. In 2021, Kazakh authorities [banned](#) a Russian-American researcher, Yevgeniy Bunin, from the country in apparent efforts to stymie his work documenting abuses in Xinjiang. Turkey denied entry to Dolkun Isa, president of the Uyghur exile organization World Uyghur Congress. Uyghurs abroad from Afghanistan to Morocco feared deportations to China as the Chinese government continued to seek their return for alleged terrorism, a term vaguely defined under Chinese law that encompasses peaceful expression and advocacy. On December 8, President Xi visited [Saudi Arabia](#), where four Uyghurs, including a child, are held without charges in deportation centers at heightened risk of forced return to China.

A powerful censorship and surveillance tool by the Chinese government on overseas-based Uyghurs, Tibetans, Christians, Falun Gong practitioners is WeChat, a super-app that combines the functions of social media, messaging, financial services, and other apps that nearly everyone in China with a smartphone uses. Because the Chinese government has banned many international apps, anyone outside the country who wants to connect with people in China has to use WeChat and thus also gets [sucked into](#) the Chinese government's machinery of censorship and surveillance.

Recommendations

The United States should:

- Ensure that religious communities in the United States with origins in or ties to China are free of threats, harassment, or persecution by actors affiliated with the Chinese government.
- Impose visa bans, travel bans, and targeted sanctions on Chinese officials responsible for religious repression under the Global Magnitsky Act.
- Encourage other governments to enforce or adopt legislations similar to the Global Magnitsky Act, such as the European Union Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, and other human rights sanctions regimes in place in Canada, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. Sanctions will be more effective if pursued collectively.
- Facilitate prosecutions on the basis of universal jurisdiction laws against Chinese officials implicated in religious persecution.
- Impose escalating actions against technology companies found to be contributing to China's mass surveillance state.
- Invest in open-source technologies that provide other channels of communication and enable people in China to more easily circumvent censorship.